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ABSTRACT

An indirect approach may best mobilize many black fathers to provide much of the emotional and positive experiences necessary for the development of their children. A program should establish a "trust working relationship" with a few fathers, have them recruit other fathers, establish father-child activities related to other than everyday concerns, have child activities planned by their fathers, and have the fathers actively involve their wives in group activities. These guidelines were suggested by a pilot project conducted at a preschool center (the King Family Center), located on the near West Side of Chicago. The purpose of the project was to explore potential strengths through which to encourage maximal development in children within the context of the father-child relationship. These guidelines were realized in two phases: the organization of the fathers' group, and the provision of activities for their children. (JM)

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A Model for Working with Black Fathers[1]

Samuel Tuck, Jr.

If poverty programs aimed at the habilitation[2] of poor Black ghettos are to be effective, they must recognize and capitalize on strengths wherever they are available. One major untapped source of strength is the Black ghetto father.

Very few studies have focused on the positive attributes of Black fathers. Instead, "father absence" is emphasized, even though a recent study revealed that 77 percent of urban Black families are headed by men. Many of these Black fathers have managed to be effective in numerous ways, despite the inherent difficulties of ghetto living; and most of them are already involved with their children in practical daily situations (Billingsley, 1968). Hence one might assume that a large number of Black fathers could relate to their children in ways that are more developmental than their current mode of relation. "Developmental" is defined here as a way of relating to a child which would enhance the child's social or academic competence.

This paper will argue that if an <u>indirect</u> rather than a direct approach is used to engage Black fathers, many of them can be mobilized to provide much of the emotional and positive experiences necessary for the development of their children. The suggested model for working with Black fathers is based on the seven operating principles which follow:

1. <u>Strive to establish a "trust working relationship" with a few fathers</u>. A "trust working relationship", as defined here, permits a father to keep those

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1. The research reported herein received support from the Kenneth Montgomery Foundation, Chicago, Illinois, the National Institutes of Health, General Research Support Grant #1-SO 1 FR 05 666-01, and the State of Illinois Department of Mental Health.

2. I choose to use the word habilitation of the ghetto rather than the frequently employed term rehabilitation. According to Webster, habilitation means to make suitable, while rehabilitation means to restore to a state of physical, mental and moral health through treatment and training. For the present inhabitants, the ghetto has never been a healthy place to live. Therefore, to habilitate the ghetto means to make it a suitable place for people to live and raise their children.

defenses which are necessary for him to maintain his masculine role as he defines it. For example, many men congregate in taverns and discuss important issues that are related to their masculinity and the welfare of their families. This pattern of action could be mobilized in the preschool setting by inviting fathers of preschool children to come to the center during the evening hours and discuss the welfare of their children over a can of beer. From a group meeting of this nature, one could elicit cues from fathers which would result in selectively designing father-child activities with which fathers could feel comfortable.

2. Actively engage these fathers in recruiting other fathers. This responsibility will not only give the fathers a sense of their own worth, but will also make them more sensitive to the problems within the community and will prompt them to think about resolutions.

3. Try to relate the proposed father-child activities to some type of vocation or some type of outdoors activity, in contrast to those concerned with the day-to-day operations of the family. It is felt that this kind of approach will allow fathers to explore areas of competence that they define as masculine, and which are normally found outside the home. In other words, it would be much easier for fathers to relate to their children through their own areas of competence than to adopt technical methods with which they are uncomfortable.

4. The group should be exclusively male, although many of its concerns will be about the welfare of children and wives. This permits the fathers to flounder in their attempts to perform new functions without being exposed to the critical eyes of their wives.

5. The group should plan special activities for their children. This will enable the fathers to become engaged with their children in enjoyable exchanges which stand in contrast to the usual concerns of feeding, protecting and disciplining. These activities should take place without the participation of the mothers.

6. Encourage the fathers to design and carry out activities for their wives. This will demonstrate to the wives that their husbands will go above and beyond the ordinary means to show how much they appreciate them, and this could help to bring about greater solidarity within the family setting.

7. Design, with the fathers, projects for the children which require the assistance of wives. This will show both parents that a combined effort sometimes enables them to produce programs for the children which are superior to anything they can achieve in their separate groups.

The above propositions emerged from a pilot project conducted at a preschool center (the King Family Center) located on the near West Side of Chicago. The purpose of the project was to explore potential strengths through which to encourage maximal development in children within the context of the father-child relationship.

The remainder of this paper will describe how these propositions evolved. They were realized in two phases. The first phase was concerned with organizing the fathers' group, and the second, with providing activities for their children.

Phase One

Initially, four fathers and their nursery school children were selected to participate in the pilot project. Two of the children were boys and two were girls. These four children had been previously assessed by two child psychiatrists to be among those in the lowest of three competence groups (Borowitz & Hirsch, 1968). A Black male family worker was assigned to work intensively with the four fathers and their children in an attempt to make the fathers more sensitive to the developmental needs of their children. At the same time, he was to foster a new kind of father-child interaction which would lead, hopefully, to the development of competence in the children.

In the first step of this phase, the worker approached each father to elicit from him, through an open-ended interview, a list of attributes which the father

felt to be desirable or undesirable in his four-year-old child. From this list, the worker selected one of the attribues which he felt was developmental, and he designed a father-child activity around it. Finally, an age-appropriate developmental toy or game was selected by the worker. The toy or game was then given to the father along with an explanation of how the activity was related to one or more of his stated aims for his child's development. The worker gave the father some specific direction on on how the toy might be utilized. However, it was made clear that the father might use the toy in any way he wished (this approach is described more fully in Scheinfeld, Bowles, Tuck, & Gold, 1969). At first, each of the fathers enthusiastically accepted the new role as teacher for his child. They all seemed eager to discuss with the worker the things which their children had learned from the toys. However, about three weeks after the initiation of the project, the fathers began to lose interest. From conversations with the fathers, the worker came to realize that all of them viewed the father-child activity as child's play and that it was in direct conflict with their masculine role as head of the family. In other words, they all seemed to be saying to the worker that playing with smaller children and toys on a regular basis was something that either the wife or older children, rather than the father, should do. In spite of these feelings, the fathers were always willing to discuss with the worker the educational needs of children in general, and even to suggest how fathers could be involved in helping to meet these needs. The three examples which follow will serve to illustrate the willingness of the fathers to become more involved with their children in developmental ways.

Mr. Jones appeared to be quite comfortable in his role as head of the family. He worked two jobs to support his family. He seemed to relish his new role as a teacher of his young child. He could verbalize practical ways for the further development of the child through the use of educational toys, although he showed very little evidence of being actively involved with the child around the toys which the worker had left with him on previous visits. He would always say that he had

played with the child, but not as much as he had promised. His usual remark was: "I played with him some, but the other kids and his mother have played with him alot." On one visit, the worker introduced a new game which he felt Mr. Jones would enjoy playing with his son. Mr. Jones gave the game to his wife to put away. Shortly after that incident, the worker asked Mr. Jones what kind of game or toy he would enjoy. Mr. Jones suggested a set of little men depicted in the uniforms of different trades. He said, "For instance, you could show him a man with a business suit on and talk to the kid about a business, or a man with a steel helmet on, and you could tell him that this man needs this kind of hat to protect his head while he is working. You could then take him down to the John Hancock Building and show him all the men in steel helmets." Mr. Jones also suggested a toy which could show the boy how to play baseball and teach him the rules of the game. Upon a return visit, the worker introduced Mr. Jones to a matching card game about various male occupations, and he appeared to be more actively engaged with his child around this particular game.

Mr. Smith, unlike Mr. Jones, was very insecure in his role as head of his family since he was unemployed. He could, however, verbalize practical means for the development of his child's potential through the use of toys. Mr. Smith's ability to talk fluently with the worker about the educational value of toys was indicative of the extent to which he had become involved with his children since the inception of the program. Also, Mr. Smith would have his four-year-old and his three-year-old demonstrate to the worker the things which they had learned from the toys left in the home. It seemed that part of Mr. Smith's extensive involvement with the toys and children was his desire to please the worker; he knew the worker was exploring job possibilities for him. The worker subsequently found a job for Mr. Smith, and soon after that time, Mr. Smith showed less interest in his new role as a teacher for his young children within the confines of his apartment. He admitted to the worker that he had enough time to play with the children, but suggested that it was important to take them outside and let them experience

different kinds of things.

The third father, Mr. Anderson, like Mr. Jones, seemed to be secure in his role as head of the family. He had a semi-skilled job and did odd jobs to make additional money. Unlike either Mr. Smith or Mr. Jones, he was very much engaged with his children on many levels. He took them on Sunday afternoon drives, went to church with them, helped the older children with their homework, and quite frequently was followed around by his children while he did odd jobs. It was not necessary for the worker to use diversionary tactics in order to get Mr. Anderson to talk about the role he should play in the educational development of his children. In many cases, Mr. Anderson took the initiative and focused the discussion on the potential educational value of toys. During one of the worker's evening visits, he was told by Mr. Anderson, "You know, it would be nice if we could get a group of fathers together and start some kind of educational program for the little kids - some kind of program that would help them to learn something that would be helpful to them later on in life." The worker responded with enthusiasm, and suggested that all of the fathers involved in the project meet together at the preschool to share a few ideas about the part fathers can play in the educational development of children.

Following Mr. Anderson's suggestion, the worker approached the other three fathers about the idea of a group approach, and they all responded positively. A meeting was subsequently arranged at the preschool center for a Sunday afternoon. Only two of the four fathers attended the first meeting. A second one drew one more father. During this session, the fathers suggested that all 25 of the fathers who had children enrolled at the preschool be involved in the future. Four of the 25 fathers attended the fourth meeting and planned the first activity for the children. They arranged to show cartoon movies and serve refreshments at the preschool center on the following Sunday afternoon. Two new fathers joined the fifth session. They said they came because they had seen evidence of the group providing enjoyable

experiences for the children. At this time, a network plan for the recruitment of the other 19 fathers evolved. The plan was for each of the six fathers present to take the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of three of the absent fathers (one father took four) and personally invite them to the next meeting. This type of recruitment plan increased the membership of the group to a total of 18, with an average of nine members attending all subsequent meetings for a period of nine months.

In brief, the strategy used to organize the fathers' group was derived from cues provided by four fathers who expressed a desire to become involved with their nursery school children in goal-directed activites. However, they wanted these activities to be different from those which are normally supervised by wives or older children.

Once the group was organized, the fathers planned and implemented programs which had more to do with enjoyable contact with their children and wives than with the development of competence per se. The fathers also sponsored a business venture which gave them the experience of becoming employers and, in addition, enough funds to extend programs for the children. These activities are described in Phase Two.

Phase Two

The fathers floundered during the initial group meetings. It was not until after their first successful experience with the childre: that the group began to take shape..

This experience was gained through the showing of cartoon movies. Thirty-three small children, one teenage girl, and one mother attended the movies. All the children enjoyed themselves and wanted to know if the activity would be repeated the following Sunday. The teenage girl helped to serve and assist with the younger children, and seemed to enjoy the role she played. The mother said it was remarkable that fathers would give up their Sunday afternoon for the children. The fathers were delighted over their accomplishment, and expressed a desire to plan and implement more programs which would bring the children together in other delightful experiences. One father said

that the preschool could play the majoy role in "formally" educating the children, while the fathers could provide activities that would help keep them happy.

With their success, the fathers felt that they had something worthwhile to offer their children. They also began to see that they could play an important role within a school setting. A spirit of group competition between the fathers and the mothers emerged. The fathers now wanted to do as much as their wives, even "out-do" them in relating to their children.

Following the cartoon showing, the fathers planned a Free Fun Fair for all the children of the community. The Fair was to take place in the community playground in two months. Almost all of the fathers were concerned about the long interval of inactivity between the cartoon showing and the Fair. One father proposed a pre-Mother's Day party for all mothers with children in the preschool. Each father and male staff member was asked to donate $3.00, and a total of $105.00 was collected for the party. A treasury of $5.00 was established for the group out of this money.

Approximately 62 people attended the party and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Individually and jointly, the mothers expressed their appreciation for the gesture. They were amazed at the degree of organization displayed by the fathers. The fathers now felt reinforced in their ability to provide a variety of rewarding experiences for their wives.

Shortly after the party, the fathers invited the mothers to join them in planning the Free Fun Fair. They made it quite clear, however, that they did not want to merge with the mothers' group, but needed their assistance to prepare for this major event.

Children from the entire neighborhood attended the Free Fun Fair, and participated in a variety of competitive games and other activities which were supervised by both the fathers and the mothers. The verbal response from adults was that this was the first time an affair of this nature had been given for the children in their community. Because a large number of children of all age groups came to participate

in the Fair, the fathers were more determined than ever to actively engage themselves in the affairs of all children in the community. The experience served to highlight group activities as a need which fathers could meet.

Soon after the Fun Fair, the fathers were awarded a $1,000 grant based on a proposal they submitted to the charitable group called Santa Claus Anonymous. The receipt of these funds gave the group momentum and inspired them to design a summer program for the children. The overall program had three components: 1) The organization of eight Little League softball teams for children between the ages of six and eight years; 2) Field trips for three- to five-year-old children from father-absent families; 3) Investment in a business venture, the returns from which would be used to insure the continuity of the program.

The total plan proved to be overly ambitious. Many of the fathers had to work long hours during the summer months, and some of the parents were concerned about the security of the children. They were able to recruit only enough children to staff three teams. Six fathers managed these teams, and the games were played on Sunday mornings for six successive weeks.

The field trips never materialized. Either the children were in Summer Head Start programs, or not enough fathers could take time from their jobs to escort all of the children.

The business venture was the most successful component of the program. The fathers obtained a franchise to sponsor a Tastee Freeze ice cream truck in the community. One father was employed to operate the truck. He hired four teenage girls from the neighborhood to assist him. Some of the other fathers helped the manager on a voluntary basis.

The ice cream truck grossed more than $3,000 during the two months it was in operation. Most of the money was used to pay for the rental of the truck and for merchandise, but more than $800.00 was funneled back into the community in the form of salaries paid to the employees. The group made a profit of $124.00 to add to their treasury and the business experience they acquired was invaluable.

Of course there were also many periods of frustration. These had to do primarily with members of the group testing the trustworthiness of the other members. This was particularly true in the case of the family worker. It was the worker's feeling that the fathers needed to test him repeatedly, since their former experiences with authority figures had been of an exploitive nature. They suspected that the worker was not solely interested in their growth and in the growth of their children as human beings.

Despite these frustrations, in the spring of 1969, the fathers applied for and were graned a state charter: "The Concerned Fathers of the Mile Square Area." The name chosen indicated that the group would no longer depend solely upon the nursery school population for the acquisition of new members but would recruit from the entire community. It also indicated that the fathers were beginning to expand upon the original objective of the group, i.e., assist the nursery school in the development of competence in their four-year-olds. They began to think in terms of the role they could play in the development of a healthy environment for the community as a whole. Their expressed opinion was: "We can best help our children by consciously acting upon our leadership abilities within the community." Following this line of logic, the fathers began to focus most of their attention on issues which had to do with community control. The fathers acknowledge that "the only real ball game in town" was <u>power</u>, i.e., economic and political power. They were forced to explore different ways of keeping and circulating money spent in the community within the community; to establish some type of economic base for their community; and to build a political machine that could exert pressure on city government.

The first plan of action was accomplished, in part, by the business venture (ice cream truck) mentioned previously. The second part of the first action plan is presently being implemented. The fathers' group has joined forces with four other different community groups, and are in the process of opening up a super market

to be located in the community where the fathers reside.

The second plan of action is to establish a Community Controlled Credit Union in the neighborhood. The fathers conceive of the Credit Union as being one of the ways to bring people together in a cooperative enterprise that would stop unethical business establishments from bleeding community residents of their scattered financial resources. Also, a credit union will serve as a vehicle whereby community residents can be actively involved in adminstering and operating a business while at the same time serving a community need. Predictably, individuals who represent bureaucratic systems responsible for issuing charters have constructed all kind of obstacles to discourage the fathers in their effort. It is no wonder that Blacks give up so readily when one considers the number of obstacles and the amount of red tape that is required of them. Despite the many disappointments the fathers have received from the Bureau of Credit Unions, they have re-doubled their efforts to get a Community Controlled Credit Union for their area.

The third plan of action will not take place until after the fathers have sufficiently motivated their neighbors to work cooperatively on projects that will benefit the neighbors directly and the community indirectly.

It should be emphasized that from the onset of the group, the fathers always supplied the cues as to the direction in which the group was to move. The major shift in direction occurred when the fathers began their quest for community control or community power. It is not clear as to the exact cause of this shift since a number of factors were operating in the fathers' community at the time it occurred. First, it was obvious to the worker that the fathers involved in the group had gained new self-esteem through successful experiences obtained in the group setting. Second, the agency hired a Black competent male to direct the nursery school -- all former directors had been White, and third, the reality of the rapid social change that was occurring throughout the United States and the world for that matter. My

hunch is that the first factor had the most significant impact on the fathers because it was through the group medium that they realized they could no longer rely on the relevancy of agencies' programs but must call upon their own inner resources to develop programs to meet their own specific needs.

Summary and Conclusion

In summary, the writer's experience with this group of fathers suggests new ways in which agencies can involve parents -- particularly fathers -- in in the kinds of experiences which reaffirm their maleness and their resourcefulness. The nature of King Family Center's relationship with the fathers moved far beyond the traditional agency-client relationship: it was viewed by both parties as a coalition of two peer groups mutually involved in competence-gaining experiences.

In conclusion, if the ghetto is to be habilitated, existing poverty programs must capitalize on the potential manpower inherent in the ghetto. Many Black fathers living there have untapped resources which they can mobilize and these will be invaluable to any kind of program striking at the root cause of poverty.

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